

Browsing Through Birke's Discussion Guide



This discussion guide was developed in 2016 by UMass Lowell students Autumn Sacramone and Suzanne St. Peters (History Dept.), and edited by Emily Mooshian (English Dept.) for the Tsongas Industrial History Center, an education partnership of University of Massachusetts Lowell's School of Education and Lowell National Historical Park.

Updated May 2023.



Foreword by Steven D. Grossman, Filmmaker, *Browsing Through Birke's*

Browsing Through Birke's has been the most enriching and rewarding labor of love I have ever undertaken. Period. Bar none.

The Birke family came into my world at the suggestion of an old friend, who had settled around Lowell in the early 1990s. She thought the store and the family who ran it would interest me as a subject for a documentary film. How right she was. As soon as I walked into the classic early 20th century four-story brick façade structure, childhood memories of exploring G. Fox's Department Store in downtown Hartford, Connecticut, with my maternal grandmother known as "Baba" came flooding back to me. The scale, the humanity, the anachronistic but now newly "vintage" clothing stock, the *sui generis* feel and smell of the place I daresay, all walloped me with an admixture of nostalgia and a strange romance. I was hooked, and knew right then and there that I should endeavor to find some way to capture this story.

A good documentary starts with a resonant empathy on the part of the filmmaker, followed by a compelling and hopefully co-operative subject. In the vibrant and voluble Szifra (SHifra), and her dignified, humane, and remarkably well-adjusted mother, Sally, I struck the mother lode.

Szifra had already established herself as a meticulous and probing family historian, so she provided me with all the documents and interview transcripts in her possession. With that strong foundation, I was well on my way. Again, Szifra could not have been more graciously welcoming and collaborative. She and her late husband Joluut hosted me in their colonial home—another environment that re-ignited my love affair with the Northeast!—on two separate occasions, and facilitated my filming in so many generous ways.

We discussed what would constitute telling and iconic scenes, and off I went. Szifra also invited lifelong customers of the Lowell landmark to stop by the store for sit-down interviews. Everyone positively loved waxing nostalgic about the salty, crusty Holocaust-surviving patriarch and sole proprietor, whose last name became synonymous with quality garments at a fair price... and with uncensored, politically incorrect, and periodically downright offensive banter!

Once I had gathered all this pithy material... the darn thing virtually edited itself! Film is a medium of juxtaposition, back to the Einsteinian fundamentals of $1 + 1 = 3$. Animated by that philosophy, the opening several minutes juxtapose and interweave the present with the past: mounds of clothing tumbling down a staircase with mounds of the brittle skeletons of Holocaust victims bulldozed into mass graves; the local T light rail train winding through Lowell and the surrounding region, transmogrifies into Nazi cattle cars hauling perplexed and frightened Eastern European Jews to death camps.

Juxtaposition came in handy as well when contrasting Nathan Birke's caustic, impatient, intolerantly judgmental exterior, with his tender and unshakably loving commitment to his family. Nathan had already been dead for several years when I came into the picture. But he was easy to evoke, despite his corporeal absence, as was the entirety of the store's impact on the downtown Lowell community, thanks to the gracious, vivid and completely unaffected accounts of Sally and Szifra. Their lucid testimony gave the film its substance, its through line, its vivacity.

Some final technical observations: The film was shot on a now very ancient and quite obsolete relatively low-res format called “Hi-8”, with its old fashioned and yes, outdated looking 4:3 square aspect ratio, and edited essentially without a budget by a crew of one, Yours Truly. The final cut was fine-tuned on what was then a very new, very revolutionary and very expensive, but not as user-friendly as it would become, non-linear system, Media 100. I did not have complete mastery of it at the time, so some of the timing of the aforementioned juxtapositions—such as the opening sequence—perhaps foregrounds the hideous shots of decaying remains from the liberated camps too much, and lingers on them a bit too long for my subsequent taste and 20-20 hindsight. But I was under the gun at the time, it was not so very easy (at all!) to re-cut once you did your “on-line” edit, and since there is no way to return to the original elements, the film as released in late 1995 must stand as the final, definitive version.

I can only hope to experience the richness of the *Browsing Through Birke*’s documentary filmmaking encounter at least one more time in my career. I am so very grateful that this film is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, due to the enthusiastic efforts of UMass Lowell’s Tsongas Industrial History Center.

Steven D. Grossman South Pasadena, CA

About the Filmmaker:

Writer, producer, cameraman and editor Steven D. Grossman received his master’s in visual anthropology from USC in 1992. While there, he garnered the prestigious Focus Award for his sound recording and design work on Stat, an intimate portrait of the challenges faced by an emergency room doctor. Subsequent awards include a local Los Angeles Emmy for his writing, producing, and cinematography contributions to a 36-episode series adapted from the textbook Anthropology: The Human Challenge, co-produced by PBS affiliate KOCE. Steven currently enjoys a thriving career in the educational, documentary, event videography and market research arenas. He would welcome any questions or comments about Browsing Through Birke’s at cameramansdg@yahoo.com.

The Documentary

“No browsing through Birke’s!”

Nathan and Sally Birke may be known to locals as the sweet lady and harsh man who owned and operated Birke’s Department Store in Lowell, Massachusetts, but their story does not begin there. The experiences behind Nathan and Sally’s behavior are traumatizing, as survivors of the Nazi regime, they faced many challenges throughout their life even after escaping the Holocaust.

They met one night in Sally’s home. Nathan was a young, intelligent, and intuitive business associate of her father. From that night they traveled down a long and horrific road that eventually led them to Lowell.

After losing family members and all their material possessions in the Holocaust, Sally and Nathan decided they would have to leave Europe to begin a new life away from the devastation. They finally made it to Lowell, Massachusetts, and saved enough money to open a clothing store that would become Birke’s Department Store. The store would prove to be therapeutic in different ways for each of them as well as for their customers.

Birke’s Department Store became a legend in the Lowell area, but it is only one example of how refugees and immigrants have sought a fresh start in Lowell. As a major relocation city for immigrants and refugees, Lowell has become a place for opportunity and healing. Holocaust survivors like the Birkes, as well as many other refugee groups, made Lowell their home. Armenians and Cambodians came here after going through genocidal experiences similar to those the Jews suffered during the Holocaust. Though these people have been through such traumatic events, they have found a safe haven in Lowell, and new lives full of opportunity.

This discussion guide embraces the histories of these genocides and helps members of the education community gain a new perspective when teaching these tough subjects. The documentary presents certain themes that might not be exact to all refugees’ experiences, but that relate to refugees and reflect the effects of war, mass murder, and loss.

The Importance of *Browsing Through Birke’s*

The documentary *Browsing Through Birke’s* is a blend of heartfelt, humorous family stories and tragic history. At the heart of the story, the film shows the trauma that genocide survivors have been through, and how they deal with the aftermath of their experiences. The Birkes dealt with their trauma differently: Sally was constantly cheerful and faced her loss only on Yom Kippur, while Nathan obsessively hung articles about the Holocaust on the walls of his store. The film shows that despite the fact that the Birkes handled their trauma differently, the department store was a form of therapy for them as survivors, and a strange city became home.

Most importantly, this film shows the effects of horrific events and how they can impact every survivor differently. The trauma also affects the descendants of survivors. Coping with the aftermath of trauma can be a day-to-day struggle. The healing process is slow and, for most, a lifelong process.

This film teaches students about difficult topics in history, topics that are hard to explain but can be shown through artistic outlets. *Browsing Through Birke's* helps students connect historical events to the effects they have on the people who experience them and shows how the past can still impact the world we live in today. The film humanizes history in a way not often seen in a standard textbook. Viewing this powerful film will not only increase students' understanding of the impact of genocide, but may also inspire them to stand up, to represent compassionate values—in short, to become the kind of present and future leaders who will contribute to greater intercultural understanding.

Suggested Guidelines for Viewing the Documentary in an Educational Setting

Browsing Through Birke's contains visually graphic material and language that some may find difficult to take in. Please view the entire film before presenting it to students to gauge whether it is suitable for a particular class. The suggested grade level is ninth grade and above.

Below are suggestions for how to prepare to show this film to students:

- Since these topics are intense, provide students with information regarding World War II and the Holocaust so they understand the significance of what is depicted in *Browsing Through Birke's*. You may want to talk with students about the [Context for the Film](#) and the [Vocabulary](#) prior to viewing.
- This documentary will likely evoke many emotions, so stress the sensitivity of the topic and the importance of expressing oneself in an appropriate way. Subjects like the Holocaust require respectful, careful reflection. Explain to students the importance of this kind of critical thinking, reminding them to be respectful of their peers when discussing the film. Their classmates (or classmates' friends or family members) may have been through situations similar to those depicted in *Browsing Through Birke's*.

Meet the Birkes

Nathan Birke

Nathan is the king of Birke's Department Store. He decides who can shop there, and he decides who will get kicked out. Despite his tough exterior, he is a very loyal man who will do anything for his family.



Sally Birke (born Sala Dymantsztajn)

Sally is the loving and caring mother and wife. She gives the store a warm, friendly feel that contrasts with her husband Nathan's harsh exterior. Sally always offers kind words to customers, as well as the occasional snack.

Szifra Birke

Szifra is a family historian of sorts. Her relationship with her father, Nathan, is loving but at times complicated by her disapproval of his abrasive personality. Szifra helps viewers see the different sides of her parents and understand the people behind Birke's Department Store.

Professionally, Szifra Birke is an Executive Leadership Coach and Financial Behavior Specialist. Her forward-looking work with entrepreneurs, CEOs, private practitioners, dentists, attorneys, financial professionals, and other service providers, as well as families and their financial advisors, is grounded in over 30 years of experience in behavioral health and helping people with transitions. She has been featured in *Business Week*, *Investment News*, *Dow Jones Newswire*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Boston Globe*. Szifra is the author of *Together We Heal*, as well as the producer of *Shrink Rap*, a syndicated cable TV show broadcast since 1997. She earned a B.A. in Psychology and Education from Boston University, and an M.S. in Professional Counseling from Purdue University. She grew up fully involved in her family's retail businesses, including managing "Sue's Teen Shop" while she was still in high school, and has co-owned several other small businesses over the years.



Influenced her parents' Holocaust experience and inspired by their tenacity, Szifra has been personally and professionally involved with Holocaust survivors and their families since 1973 while a graduate student at Purdue.

Vocabulary

Who is a refugee?

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.”¹

Who is an immigrant?

A person who leaves his or her country of origin and goes to a new country to live there permanently.

What is genocide?

According to the UN, “Genocide is defined in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) as ‘any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.’”²

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a mental health condition that is triggered by a traumatic event. Things in everyday life can trigger PTSD symptoms such as flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and nightmares.³

The Community

Lowell, Massachusetts, is home to large numbers of immigrants and refugees. With the arrival of each new group of people, the city becomes even more culturally diverse. People from all parts of the world who have settled in Lowell contribute to making it a better city, as new arrivals have since the city’s founding. Like the Birkes, many immigrants and refugees eventually achieve economic security by establishing small businesses such as grocery stores and restaurants. For many newcomers, Lowell provides a second chance and fresh start. The community offers a variety of assistance programs, helping new residents meet needs ranging from housing to health care, both mental and physical.

¹ (<http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/>)

² (http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/osapg_analysis_framework.pdf)

³ ([https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd#:~:text=Post%2Dtraumatic%20stress%20disorder%20\(PTSD,danger%20or%20to%20avoid%20it.\)](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd#:~:text=Post%2Dtraumatic%20stress%20disorder%20(PTSD,danger%20or%20to%20avoid%20it.)))

Context for the Film

Part I: The Birke Family Background

Sally had a humble beginning in Poland. She had to leave school at the age of 13 to help support her family. By contrast, Nathan was highly educated. A wealthy businessman by age 32, he was 13 years older than Sally and a business associate of her father. One day Nathan was riding in his horse and buggy when he saw Sally's father walking home and offered him a ride. By the time they arrived it was past the country-wide curfew imposed by Hitler, so Sally's father insisted Nathan stay the night to avoid trouble with the Nazis. This was how Nathan and Sally first met.

Part II: Effects

Sally

When people began to fear being taken by the Nazis, Sally's parents sent her older brother, Moshe Aaron, away. When he left Lodz, the family's hometown, he had a pre-planned itinerary toward Russia. Before long, Sally's mother began to regret having told him to go. She missed him desperately and felt she had miscalculated the danger in Poland when she suggested he leave. Out of concern for her mother's anguish, Sally offered to find Moshe Aaron and bring him back. Nathan went with her as her guardian.

They made it all the way to Russia and decided that it wasn't safe to return home. In order for 18-year-old Sally to maintain propriety while traveling with a man, Sally and Nathan got married. In Russia, both went to work in a coal mine. Sally never found her brother and lost the rest of her family in the Holocaust. While in Russia, she gave birth to two infant boys, Pinchas and Chaim. Both died. Adding to the grief of losing her loved ones, she lost her family's home and all of the personal possessions that could have helped her remember their life together. Yet after all she went through, Sally stayed positive. This does not mean she did not have strong feelings that she quietly dealt with on a daily basis. Each Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, she set aside time to spend by herself. She wanted to deliberately remember, honor, and grieve each family member she had lost—to slow down and feel the loss and the pain.

Sally suffered great losses, but to customers walking into Birke's Department Store, she was the friendly and welcoming face behind the counter. She would make customers feel like family, maybe because she was missing the family she lost. She regularly offered homemade food to customers, greeted them with a smile, and had a friendly conversation with them. She would give advice, and help customers deal with her husband's off-putting attitude and behavior.

Nathan

Nathan could seem gruff or even hostile, but learning about his past provides a clue as to why he behaved this way. Nathan lost everything in the Holocaust - all his family, his businesses and much hope; he repeatedly had to start over due to moving from place to place. When he finally settled in Lowell and opened Birke's Department Store, he probably felt a great sense of relief at having security for his family. Having left Europe with no possessions, he opened Birke's to provide for his family. Nathan had strong opinions, and in Birke's, his words were law. It was his place, and owning it seemed to give him a sense of permanency and freedom to be himself.

Szifra

Szifra Birke recounts what it was like growing up with her parents and the store that was a source of comfort for them:

“From the time I was a teen, I had visual Holocaust intrusions in my daily life, and over-identified with my parents’ losses. I felt responsible to be a good student and kid, not bring any other pain into their lives—also perhaps to please my dad and keep him from getting angry and yelling.

“Being with my dad at the store was often embarrassing, sometimes mortifying. He could be shockingly insulting to customers. Sometimes I could successfully get him to simmer down a bit. Often, though, I just went to another part of the store to get away.

“Though not a Zionist, when I was about 9 my dad took me out of school to see the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, speak at Brandeis University. After agreeing that I’d say hello when Ben-Gurion walked past us, I was totally overcome by the pomp and circumstance and I froze. Next thing I know, I’m in the aisle tumbling into this head of state who is surrounded by guards and dignitaries. My dad had pushed me! On the way home in response to why he pushed me (made more polite for this guide): ‘You wasn’t going to say hello... He puts his pants on the same way as anybody; I never want you will never be afraid of people!’”

Part III: Genocides

Armenian Genocide

The Armenian Genocide took place from 1915 to 1924. The Ottoman Empire, specifically the Turkish government and people, rounded up the Armenian minority in what is now the Republic of Turkey and murdered all the healthy men. Then, they rounded up women and children as well as the old and sick and sent them on a “death march” to the Syrian Desert. During this march they were denied food and water. To this day, Turkey refuses to recognize this killing of an estimated 800,000-1,500,000 people as a genocide.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust took place from 1933 to 1945. The Nazi regime, under Adolf Hitler, came to power and started systematically executing people. The killing began with members of opposing political parties, like Communists, and led to an all-out “ethnic cleansing” directed at Jews. During this time, Jewish men, women, children and elders were sent to concentration camps where they would work until they were eventually killed. An estimated 6 million people were murdered during the Holocaust.

Cambodian Genocide

The Cambodian Genocide took place from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge regime was led by Pol Pot, whose goal was to “restore” Cambodia to an agrarian society and eliminate any outside influence that differed from his vision. The Khmer Rouge executed anyone who was involved with the prior regime, including leaders, educators, police, military, and anyone who did not fit the simple agrarian mold. It is estimated that 2.2 million Cambodians were murdered by Pol Pot and his regime.

Similarities Among These Genocides

Each of these genocides began when a political party with extremist ideas of a perfect society came to power. Hitler believed that he must expand Germany and in order to do that he needed an “ethnically pure” population. The Khmer Rouge regime wanted to take back control of Cambodia and expel all Western influences. The Ottoman Empire wanted an “ethnically pure” society of only

Turks to be strong enough, in their opinion, to expand. Regardless of their reasoning, these regimes set goals for themselves, found a position of power, and implemented their visions. Each one of these events occurred over a number of years, and the devastation was shocking. They did not care if they were killing a man, woman, child, or elder. The people leading these genocides discriminated based on religion, race and political values, and did not want anyone from the groups they were prosecuting to survive, regardless of age and gender.

Post Viewing

It is important for students to recognize that people today go through horrible experiences like those the Birkes endured. Viewing this film will hopefully remind students that there is always more to people than meets the eye, so they should always strive to be respectful and compassionate towards others.

After watching the documentary:

- Revisit the points in the Vocabulary and Context sections.
- Use the Reflection Questions to prompt discussion.
 - Group Discussions: Provide students (in pairs or groups) with questions related to the film. Use open-ended questions that enable students to share thoughts and consider new ideas.
- Flipped Classroom: This exercise reverses the typical learning structure. Students bring home the subject material (in this case, the film *Browsing Through Birke's*) and engage in online research by watching videos or reading articles and then returning to the classroom to do related activities and discussions.
- Reflection Papers: Have students reflect on and write about the film.

Reflection Questions

Choosing Questions for Discussions

In deciding which of the following questions to use in a discussion or interview, it helps to ask, “What outcome am I looking for?” For example, do I want participants to learn/feel something important? Or to notice commonalities across cultures and time periods? Is the goal to mobilize some additional action (smiling more at “different” people, helping, or getting involved in some way, teaching, standing up or modelling for family or friends)?

For the Classroom

- What is your overall impression of the film?
- How are the historical events depicted in the film relevant today? What can we learn from them?
- In what ways did Sally and Nathan's family deal with the trauma they experienced during the Holocaust?
- Sally Birke routinely offered food to customers. How would you explain this rather unusual practice, given what you know about the Birkes' experience?
- This film reflects a fairly complete family history going back through three generations of Birkes. How far back can you trace your family? What historic world events shaped your

family history?

- Based on Sally Birke's telling of the family's coming to America and starting a new life here, how typical do you think their experience was as new immigrants? Do you have family or friends with similar stories and backgrounds? How did they rebuild their lives here?
- How do you explain the filmmaker's use of the graphic videos in the film? What feelings did these videos bring up for you?
- How is keeping and replaying such graphic visual images such as these important to the telling of history?
- The world has changed in many ways since the Holocaust, yet regarding immigrants and refugees, some of the same issues still exist. What is happening in today's world that is reminiscent of the tragedies during World War II? How might local and national support systems better meet the needs of refugees and immigrants?
- How should a community help heal its residents? What programs are available in your community to help people recover after traumatic events, or to help those in later generations?

For a Public Program

- How was the Birkes' experience like or different from the experiences of immigrants/refugees today — particularly those who left countries where their lives were at great risk?
- What is happening in the world today that is reminiscent of the time during World War II when the Birkes fled Europe?
- How might the Birkes' background as Holocaust survivors help explain the way they ran their business?
- What does the film suggest about the legacy of trauma across generations?
- How do newcomers who have endured trauma in their native lands find healing?
- How might local and national support systems better meet the needs of refugees and immigrants?
- What are the benefits to a community to helping in the healing of its residents?
- How can discussions help build understanding and unity between people of different backgrounds?
- How can history (such as that revealed in this film) be used as a tool to help preclude future atrocities?

For Immigrant/Refugee Interviews or Panel Discussions

- How were you introduced to the United States and to Lowell (or another town/city)? What did you know about the town/city before you arrived?
- You made the difficult choice of leaving your homeland and settling in Lowell (or another town/city). What have you gained, and what have you lost?
- What one thing do you miss most about your former home? What in your new home (town/city) has replaced this, if anything?
- How have you, your family, or friends with similar stories and backgrounds rebuilt your lives here in Lowell (or another town/city)?
- *If the interviewee has seen the film:*
- How was the Birkes' experience like or different from your experience of leaving your homeland and coming to Lowell (or another town/city)?
- Have you ever felt misunderstood, perhaps the way Nathan Birke was by people who didn't know his personal story?

Lowell Community Resources

International Institute of New England

The Institute helps resettle refugees in New England to “build vibrant, inclusive communities in New England by welcoming refugees and immigrants and providing them education and guided pathways to careers and citizenship.” Their website lists services in the Lowell area: <http://iine.org/services/>

Metta Health Center

This branch of the Lowell Community Health Center is a fully integrated West meets East health care facility serving the needs of refugees and immigrants. Metta Health Center provides services such as chronic disease management, nutrition counseling, and mental health services. For more information, see <http://www.lchealth.org/patients/connect-services/metta-health-center>.

Religious and Non-governmental Charities

There are many religious charities and non-governmental, community-based organizations that provide help to immigrants and refugees new to Massachusetts. For a list of charities in the Merrimack Valley area, visit [https:// www.ccab.org/about-us/locations/](https://www.ccab.org/about-us/locations/).